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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001458

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2027

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARB, MURR ACCUSE ROBERT GHANEM OF BEING
"SYRIA'S CHOICE"

REF: A. BEIRUT 1439

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1422

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 1334

[1](#)D. BEIRUT 1424

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) As Lebanese muse about possible compromise presidential candidates, the name of West Biqa' MP Robert Ghanem -- an on-again/off-again affiliate (but not founding) member of March 14 -- comes up with increasing frequency. UN envoy Geir Pedersen was encouraged that Hizballah seemed open to going beyond the usual roster of March 8 candidates (Michel Aoun, Jean Obeid) to include Ghanem (ref a). Saad Hariri noted that it would be hard for him to turn down Ghanem, given Ghanem's approval of all petitions related to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (ref b) and his inclusion on Saad Hariri's West Biqa' parliamentary list. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri included Ghanem in his list of four probable candidates as far back as three weeks ago (ref c) Zahle MP Ily Skaff told the Ambassador on 9/19 that he would be willing to abandon his alliance with Michel Aoun to back Ghanem, and he thought four of the five Zahle MPs would go along with him.

[1](#)2. (S) But in separate meetings with the Ambassador on 9/21, March 14 presidential candidate Boutros Harb and Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr both warned that it is not a coincidence that Ghanem's name is circulating. He is, they both claimed, the candidate of Rustom Ghazaleh, the Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) chief in Lebanon until the April 2005 closure of SMI's overt offices in Lebanon. Harb, who like Ghanem is a lawyer, emphasized Ghanem's business and personal ties to Syria. Ghanem is the personal lawyer of Syrian businessman/hotelier Osman Aidi (a connection that also makes Walid Jumblatt suspicious of Ghanem). Ghanem's Paris apartment was purchased for him by Aidi, Harb claimed. Repeating a familiar if unconfirmable rumor (especially as one of the paramours is now dead), Harb also claimed that Ghanem's political prominence in an area of Lebanon traditionally under heavy Syrian domination stems from Ghanem having pimped his wife Vivienne to former SMI chief Ghazi Kanaan.

[1](#)3. (S) Murr claimed to have more up-to-date information about Ghanem's connections to Syria. A Zahleh restaurateur with the family name of Hanoush was recently summoned to Ghazaleh's office in Syria. While there, Ghazaleh asked him to pass a message to Ily Skaff, that Ghazaleh wants him to find the right time after Michel Aoun's presidential

candidacy is eliminated to shift his support to Ghanem. Ghanem will be Lebanon's next president, Ghazaleh told Hanoush. Bringing up another rumor of the importance of wives on the Lebanese campaign trail, Murr said that Hanoush is "well known" as the match-maker between Ily Skaff's wife Miriam (a cousin of Samir Geagea's wife Setrida) and Ghazaleh, with quarters behind his restaurant serving as the meeting place for their trysts. Murr said that he knows the story of Hanoush's message to Skaff about Ghanem from his father Michel, who, like Ily Skaff, is becoming increasingly disillusioned with their ally Michel Aoun. Skaff shared the message with the elder Murr in hopes of getting Murr on board. Michel then told his son, who then called the Ambassador to request the urgent meeting to pass the story on.

14. (S) Comment: In general (and as noted ref d), we have found Ghanem to be a likable, decent contact and competent lawmaker, but not one who comes across as particularly forceful. Harb and Murr are neither allies nor friends, so we doubt they coordinated their messages. Both have reasons to want Ghanem out of the presidential race: Harb would want a competitor eliminated to advance his own prospects of becoming the consensus choice. Murr -- like his father -- wants to clear the field for LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, over whom the Murrs have influence. (Sleiman, Murr argues, has been repeatedly tested: the March 14 demonstration, LAF deployment to the south, Nahr al-Barid.) Still, there's something suspicious about Hizballah and Berri appearing ready to accept Ghanem. We need to dig further into his current links to the Syrians. But whatever Ghazaleh's views, Christian sensibilities alone may put a brake on Ghanem's candidacy. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea expressed his determination to veto Ghanem, in a meeting with us on 9/17. And we remember once asking Maronite Patriarch Sfeir about

BEIRUT 00001458 002 OF 002

Ghanem's prospects for the presidency. "Is he a Maronite?" Sfeir responded, a withering insult referring to Ghanem's pitiful, subservient role in Syrian-occupied Lebanon. End comment.
FELTMAN